

SPOKEN TESTIMONY TO
SENATE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS COMMITTEE

September 20, 2007

Madame Chairwoman, Senators, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today regarding the state of our bridges.

My name is Kirk Steudle, I am Director and Chief Executive Officer at the Michigan Department of Transportation, here on behalf of AASHTO, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

First, I'd like to express my sympathy to the families who suffered because of the tragic bridge collapse in Minneapolis. Believe me when I say that, as transportation professionals, we take a tragedy like that very much to heart.

Of the nearly 600,000 bridges in this country, just over 12 percent, roughly 74,000, are classified as "structurally deficient." That doesn't mean they are unsafe. It means that one or more structural conditions require attention, which can range from simple deck repairs to reinforcement of support structures. It means that work needs to be done.

You did your work last week, by voting to increase funding for the federal Highway Bridge Program by \$1 billion, and we appreciate it. SAFETEA-LU increased funding for the Highway Bridge Program by a modest six percent, but the costs for steel, concrete, fuel, and asphalt jumped 46 percent from 2003 to 2006.

More funding for bridges is clearly needed, but funding should be combined with long-term data-driven management practices to give states the flexibility necessary to maintain our bridges.

I emphasize that, because the rules that govern federal Highway Bridge Program funding are not compatible with a comprehensive asset management approach.

Many states find the funds so restrictive that they transfer some of their federal bridge apportionment to other, more flexible, programs, or use apportionments from other programs on bridges. For example, in the past two years, MDOT spent less than 90 percent of its federal bridge funds, not because we weren't investing in bridges, but because the rules for those funds are too restrictive.

All state DOTs inspect their bridges regularly, but as part of Michigan's asset management approach, we actually inspect our bridges more thoroughly and more often than required by federal law. We set strategic goals for road and bridge preservation. We manage our bridge network, slowing deterioration with capital preventive maintenance.

And we have had to look beyond the federal Highway Bridge Program for funding. MDOT added \$75 million annually in state funds, just for bridge preservation. Michigan invests \$190 million annually in bridges, \$100 million in federal funds and \$90 million in state funds.

In fact, most states spend more money on bridges than is provided by the federal bridge program. In 2004, the federal bridge program provided just over \$5 billion, but total investment in bridges that year was well over \$10 billion. State and local governments made up the difference.

More money is definitely needed, but so is a new approach. In 1998, MDOT improved just over 100 structurally deficient bridges, while at the same time adding about 162 other bridges to the list. Fixing the "worst first" was a no-win proposition.

We can keep bridges from deteriorating, while systematically upgrading those in poor condition. As an example, today MDOT has completely reversed those numbers from ten years ago, improving about 145 bridges a year, taking them off the structurally deficient list, while adding only about 86 bridges a year to that list.

In 1998, MDOT had 21 percent poor bridges. Because of our rigorous asset management effort, today we are down to 14 percent poor. This is a 30 percent improvement during a time when many of our interstate bridges were turning 50.

Specifically, we suggest that the federal highway bridge program be revised to allow full expenditure of bridge funds under a comprehensive management approach:

- First, eliminate the “ten year rule” that prevents state DOTs from using federal bridge funds on a bridge more than once in ten years, so they can pursue less expensive repairs that preserve the bridge before it deteriorates.
- Second, eliminate the 100 point sufficiency ratings and the arbitrary cutoffs for eligibility. If a state has a bridge management program in place, it should be able to use federal funds on projects it identifies as most efficiently preserving the bridge network.
- If you have to keep the sufficiency rating, at least give us more flexibility. For example, the formula that generates the sufficiency rating does not place much value on deck condition. As a result, states are not allowed to use federal bridge funds to improve a poor deck if other elements, such as superstructure and substructure, are still in good condition. More than a third of MDOT’s 608 structurally deficient bridges are ineligible for federal bridge funds. They have poor decks, and the deck alone is not enough to qualify, even though a poor deck actually accelerates deterioration. It’s kind of like saying you can’t spend money on shingles to fix your leaky roof until the moisture has destroyed the drywall or cracked the foundation.

In conclusion, let me say again that more funding for bridges is a good start, but it is only a start. The rules need to be revised. And we need to remember that bridges do not operate in a vacuum. Many structurally deficient bridges are on major freeways that also need repair. Often we cannot fix the bridges without doing major road work as well.

And funding for that road work is uncertain. Inflation has eroded our buying power, and the Federal Highway Trust Fund is expected to have a shortfall of \$4.3 billion in 2009.

Additional federal bridge funding is certainly welcome, but please do not lose sight of the entire transportation funding picture. The same challenges that exist for bridges exist for the highways, railroads, airports, busses and ports.

Thank you, Chairwoman Boxer, for bringing this important and necessary debate on the state of our bridges to the forefront.